

Board meeting: Just in time for the holidays, families are redefining quality time over board games

Robin Summerfield

Calgary Herald

Friday, December 09, 2005

"Who's holding it up here?"

"I am," he answers, pondering his next move.

"You're strategizing, are you?" she teases.

"Have you guessed yet?" he asks.

"Be quiet," she replies.

The playful banter between husband and wife Dan and Wendy Downe belies some serious business.

They are trying to solve a murder.

Anthropologist John Boddy has been killed inside the mansion of his Hampshire estate and the list of suspects includes Miss Scarlet, Professor Plum, Col. Mustard and the rest of the colourful crew. A wrench, a rope, a revolver, a lead pipe -- the murder weapon is also an unknown.

The Downes' children, Danielle, 16, Cassandra, 13, and Quinn, 9, are also playing detective, trying to solve the mysterious death, the premise behind the classic board game Clue laid out before them on the dining room table.

Playing games like Clue, Yahtzee, Monopoly, Scrabble, chess, backgammon and cards is a family tradition in the Downes' southwest Calgary home.

About once a week, usually on weekends, the family gathers together around the table and pulls out a game. Over summer holidays at the family's cabin in P.E.I., games play is ramped up, filling lazy days. And every Christmas for the past decade, a new board game is always wrapped up under the tree, a gift to the family from Wendy and Dan.

"We don't watch a lot of TV," says the 46-year-old mom.

The Downe family is a part of a growing scene being played out (pun intended) at kitchen, coffee and dining room tables across North America. While computer games, Internet and TV remain popular pastimes, many parents have chosen to include board games -- where the only moving parts are hands casting dice, dealing cards or stacking checkers -- into their family's entertainment

repertoires.

Board games have made a comeback, if they ever went out of style.



CREDIT: Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald
(People playing a board game)

Clue, for example, has been on the market since 1946, while Monopoly first appeared in 1934 and has since sold more than 200 million copies in 80 countries.

Families are rediscovering the simplicity and fun in unforced quality time spent rolling dice, buying Boardwalk and cracking the case. No surprise, the holiday season also kickstarts games play as families, extended or otherwise, have hours to share after opening presents and overdosing on turkey. A board game entertains and keeps the family peace (unless, of course, the spirit of competition overtakes the spirit of the season).

Perhaps it's a feeling of nostalgia and a reminder of simpler times -- when words like terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and avian flu weren't part of our vernacular -- that draws people to the table.

Blame 9/11.

One good thing to come from that day: family time once again took precedence.

After the terrorist attacks, there was a huge surge in board game sales, says John Tait, owner of The Discovery Hut, a specialty games and toys store in Chinook Centre. That first Christmas after the attacks, he estimates game sales jumped 30 to 40 per cent. "And it's still growing."

Today, playing board games provides sweet relief from our busy, noisy and tech-heavy lives of television, video games, the Internet and cellphones, he argues.

"We're so immersed in technology, playing a board game is a break from all that," Tait says. "A board game is different and it's fun. It's simple.

"A board game is something you can pull away from all that and say 'Hey let's do this together.' "

Whether it's family togetherness or a break from technology, sales aren't slowing.

In each of the past three years, there has been a 20 per cent jump in board game sales in Canada, says David Manga, president of Victoria-based Outset Media, a games and puzzle company.

Manga says there are three main reasons for the sales growth. Some entertainment -- a family night at the movies, for example -- is expensive, while board games are cost effective (between \$25 and \$60 each) and can be played many times.

Parents concerned about their kids spending too much time at the computer are increasingly buying games to help teach social skills and reduce screen time, he says. And finally, there are some great games on the market right now, says Manga.

Back at the tabletop murder scene inside the Downe home, togetherness and an undercurrent of competition drives the game.

The Downes each take turns casting the dice, counting the spaces and moving their characters into the mansion's rooms.

"Was it Miss Scarlet in the kitchen with the revolver?" Quinn asks his family.

Older sister Danielle discreetly slides over a Clue card for his eyes only while younger sis Cassandra scribbles something down on her notepad.

"What are you writing there?" Dan asks his daughter, who doesn't reply but smiles to herself.

"She's good," says Wendy, marvelling at her daughter's game playing acumen. "She's a smart card player, that Cassandra Downe."

"I'm clueless," Wendy adds quickly to a murmur of groans from around the table.

Family time is particularly important these days as Wendy has breast cancer. She's been on medical leave from her job as a lawyer for the past three and a half years.

"I find it's really relaxing," says Wendy, who is in the midst of chemotherapy treatments.

While computer and PlayStation time has to be earned by youngsters in the Downe household, board games, so long as homework is done, are never prohibited.

"Quinn especially, has a tendency to get what I call 'squarehead,' " says Wendy, describing the glazed, too-much-computer-time look her son gets sometimes. "With (board) games, that doesn't happen."

An estimated 500 to 1,000 new games are introduced in North America each year, says Manga.

Of those, only about 20 to 50 make it each year.

"It's a tough, tough market," he says.

The ones that last, he says, have short instructions, are easy to play, hold players' interest and stand the test of time.

"The truly great games are the ones you play over and over again."

To help families sort through the shelves full of new games each year, the Canadian Toy Testing Council, a non-profit organization based in Ottawa, puts board games to the test, filtering out the best from the boring using family testers.

Among the games identified by the council as best bets for 2006: Things

. . . Humour in a Box; Cranium's Balloon Lagoon and Whoonu; Sleeping Queens; Snorta; Ticket to Ride; Chardoodles; and Wave Length. (For a complete list visit www.toy-testing.org.)

The most popular games are the ones where family and friends get together and have a good laugh, says Tait.

"We've seen six years of unprecedented growth in the board games and family games categories," adds Jonathan Albin, Colorado-based marketing director of Games Quarterly, a magazine with articles on board and card games, role playing games and the culture and strategy behind games play.

People, Albin also argues, have become tired of living vicariously through movies and TV. Why live through actors when you can be part of the action yourself at the game table? asks Albin.

At the game table, a.k.a. the Downe's dining room table, the family is immersed in murder, imaginary as it is.

Game time has become a satisfying distraction from the family's busy life. Dan is a lawyer and partner in a Calgary law firm, and the kids are involved in all sorts of sports, dance and art classes, shuttling here and there after school.

But Boddy's murder, or rather the solving of that imaginary slaying, provides healthy downtime.

Less than 30 minutes into the game and with only a few failed guesses at the table, Cassandra thinks she has the mystery solved.

"It was Miss Scarlet with the rope in the conservatory," she tells her family.

"She's right, isn't she?" asks Wendy incredulously.

"I'm right, aren't I," Cassandra says triumphantly.

Mystery solved -- at least until the next time John Boddy gets himself killed in his Tudor mansion.

rsummerfield@theherald.canwest.com

- - -

Games we play

- The Royal Game of Ur may be the world's oldest board game. It was played in Babylon more than 5,000 years ago.

- Board games were popular in

India in the fifth century BC. Chess was introduced to China from India in about 700 AD. A form of backgammon was popular in Rome in the first century AD.

-Jacks, originally a Roman

pastime, enjoyed enormous and widespread popularity after the First World War.

- The first commercial games were printed on paper sheets. A Journey Through Europe, published in 1759 by Carrington Bowles, is the earliest dated game known in England.

- Scrabble was invented in New York during the Depression.

Today, the game is produced in 31 languages and more than 100

million sets have been sold in 120 countries.

- Monopoly was invented 1934, also during the Depression, and has sold more than 200 million copies in 80 countries. The longest Monopoly game lasted 70 straight days.

- Canadian Toy Testing Council's best board games for 2006 include: Things . . . Humour in a Box; Cranium's Balloon Lagoon and Whoonu; Sleeping Queens; Snorta; Ticket to Ride;

Chardoodles; and Wave Length.

Sources: www.toy-testing.org and www.hasbro.com.

© The Calgary Herald 2005

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.